



Children Affected by Substance Use

By Jackie Berganio

Substance use affects not just the addicted/dependent person but many others – families, friends, communities and employers. Among those most affected are the children of parents experiencing substance use disorders.

By the time they turn 18 years old, approximately one out of every four children in the U.S. will have been exposed to alcohol abuse and/or dependence in the family, according to the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. This equates to more than 18 million children of alcoholics or children of substance abusers in the nation.

Parental substance abuse interrupts a child's normal development, placing these young people at higher risk for emotional, physical and mental health problems, including:

- Three to four times more likely to form an addiction to alcohol or other drugs
- Higher prevalence of depression, anxiety, eating disorders and suicide attempts compared with their peers
- Greater likelihood to have learning disabilities, to repeat grades, to attend different schools, to drop out of school, and to have truancy and delinquency problems.
- Higher rates of several physical illnesses, generally believed to be manifested by increased stress.

The good news is that three out of four will likely not become alcoholic. This may be attributed to a host of variables, protective factors and resilience factors.

With the risk factors in mind, a collaboration among several agencies and organizations in King County was formed to support these children and improve their chances for a healthier, better life.

The Program

During January 2006, King County Family Treatment Court (FTC) issued a call for action to provide more programming for children in alcoholic or drug addicted families and children living in foster/kinship care due to alcoholism and/or addiction by their parents/legal guardians. In all, there are 106,645 young people in King County under the age of 19 who meet this definition (according to U.S. Census Bureau population estimates from July 2004).

A work group coordinated by the King County Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention Program (AODPP) went to work on strategizing solutions. The work group included representatives from the FTC, the state Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and other King County staff.

The work group successfully launched two major prevention efforts:

- 1) Friends Group
- 2) Celebrate Family Day.

Friends Group

With funding from the King County Community Organizing Program (KCCOP), Youth Eastside Services (YES) was contracted to create "The Friends Group" for youth ages 10-12 whose parents or guardians are alcohol and/or other drug abusing. With referrals from the Eastside DCFS and other organizations, the group began April 27th and ran for eight weeks.

Celebrate Family!

The AODPP and KCCOP jointly funded the "Celebrate Family!" event held May 20, 2006 at the Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame in Seattle. The event drew 89 attendees (75 family members and 14 staff/exhibitors/presenters/guests). To engage the participants, the event included speakers, a video (Lots of Kids Like Us), a facilitator, small group discussions, exhibitors (Alanon/Alateen, and Washington State Alcohol and Drug Clearinghouse), food and entertainment. According to data gathered from 28 completed evaluation forms:

- Attendees self-identified themselves as Mother 36%, Father 2%, Foster Parent 29%, Grandparent 11%, Family Friend 7%, Prevention Professional 7%, Child or Youth 21%, Other 29%. [Note: They were able to choose all that applied.]
- Participants heard about the event through a variety of sources from DSHS, King County, school, foster care, CASA, agency, friend, and email.
- Respondents had significant changes in knowledge from pre- to post-event for the question, "How much did you know about the disease of alcoholism and other drug addiction." There was an increase from 2.89 to 3.41 on a 4-point scale (1=Not Much At All to 4=A Great Deal).
- Respondents had significant changes in knowledge from pre- to post-event for the question, "How knowledgeable were you regarding ways to support children and youth to be healthy and drug-free." There was an increase from 2.69 to 3.56 on a 4-point scale (1=Not At All Knowledgeable to 4=Very Knowledgeable).
- Eighty-six percent of respondents agreed with the statement, "Because of this event, I have more knowledge to help my family/ friends deal with issues of drugs, alcohol and violence."
- As a result of attending this event, 50% of the respondents said they hoped to use the information and resources; 75% intended to share information and resources; 32% hoped to seek additional resources to better educate themselves on how to support children to be healthy and drug-free; 39% wanted to learn more about alcohol and other drug prevention programs in the community; and 36% wanted to participate in local support groups.
- Fifty-four percent of respondents provided their contact information to be notified about any other special events and trainings which may be offered.

- The comments were overwhelmingly positive, such as: "Great event that needs to be shared with even more families." "Awesome, kids well involved." "Very fun event for parents. Kids were impressed. Quite educational." "An overall success; perhaps more small group work." "

The Model Behind the Program

Both "The Friends Group" and the "Celebrate Family!" event used materials and curricula that teach children about the "three C's of addiction":

1. You didn't CAUSE it.
2. You can't CONTROL it.
3. You can't CURE it.

Education about the three C's is an attempt to counteract a frequently-held underlying belief of children that they caused their parent's alcoholism/addiction or are to blame in some way. Emotionally and intellectually, children are not developmentally able to understand parental behavior except in terms of their selves.

Through education and experiential learning, children gained knowledge and skills in various areas, including: 1) what alcoholism/addiction is; 2) how to identify trustworthy people to talk with and share their feelings; 3) what is within their control and what is outside of their control; and 4) how to be safe.

Adults who attended the "Celebrate Family!" event also learned about addiction and ways to support children affected by a family member's substance use.

The AODPP will continue discussions with their partner agencies to determine and plan future prevention activities to help this target population of at-risk kids. This may include an annual "Celebrate Family!" day and additional educational support groups.

For Further Information

The Recovery Month 2006 website has a section on "Affected Families: Helping Families and Children Cope With the Substance Use Disorder of Someone Close." For more information, visit http://www.recoverymonth.gov/2006/kit/html/Targeted_Outreach/families.aspx